Between Two Worlds: Promoting Identity Development in Middle School

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Abstract

This paper highlights a (2022) study conducted in a Canadian school division with middle school teachers. The purpose of this study was to learn what middle school teachers did to positively connect with their students. Due to COVID-related concerns, four participants were interviewed individually via zoom and asked to share strategies that they incorporated in the classroom and school to make these connections. Middle school teachers shared strategies and practices that facilitated identity development in their students. Participants in this study appeared to encourage identity development by encouraging introspection and extrospection in their classrooms. They recognized the importance of establishing class routines promoting self-regulation and developing empathy for others. They also created opportunities for students to discuss and learn about local and global topics in class. Their responses are compared and contrasted with past scholarship highlighting the importance of identity development for young people.

Keywords: Middle school; teachers; students; identity; introspection; extrospection.

A "Turbulent" and vulnerable time

Although not the case for every young person, middle school can be "a turbulent time for young adolescents" because "in the middle school years, [as] many students possess increasingly negative attitudes toward school." (Raphael & Burke, 2012, p.1). Faust et al. (2014) describe the time in middle school as a "period of greater vulnerability and challenges to values, norms, and self-esteem" (p.43). It appears that one of the consequences of the middle school years is a "normative decline in relationship quality" (Duong et al., 2019, p.212), due to an increase in social, academic, and physiological challenges. Some of the challenges facing students include, "increased social comparison and competition, and heightened demands for academic success." (Duong et al., 2019, p.212).

Another significant inhibitor of positive student-teacher connections includes, "the developmental shift that children experience as they become more peer-oriented" and "having multiple teachers each day and less time spent together with each teacher" (Prewett et al., 2019, p.69). Carlisle (2011) posits that, "Adolescents' socio-emotional health and motivation is highly influenced by the relationships they have with their peers; their relationships with adult figures and parents often become secondary in this developmental stage" (p.20). Although middle school students may consider their relationships with adults to be of secondary importance, it is perhaps this time where they may matter most. This includes students' relationships with their teachers.

Benefits of positive student-teacher connections

It appears that positive teacher-student connections contribute to student success (Davis, 2001; Hamre and Pianta, 2006; Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin, 2011; Reimer, 2014; Reimer, 2022). Positive connections with their teachers make students "feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains" (Hamre and Pianta, 2006, p.59). Additionally, students who positively connected with their teachers "had higher grades and graduation rates" (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011, p.1755). For this reason, many believe that schools should make relationship and community building a top priority at all levels (Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon, 2004; Hamre and Pianta, 2006).

Although essential in the earlier grades, "student-teacher relationships are [also] important after the middle school transition" (Duong et al., 2019, p.212). Still, the reality is that less is known

about the positive effects of teacher-student connections as students move from elementary school into middle and high school (Prewett et al., 2019, p.69). As middle school represents such a transitional time for young people, perhaps more critical than ever for middle school teachers to build positive relationships with their students. Carlisle (2011) notes that during adolescence, "the onset of puberty and other body development changes may lead to insecurity and low self-esteem, which can also affect adolescents' socio-emotional health" (p.20). Further, students in middle school are "developing metacognition, which allows them to analyze and think about their own thinking and learning, and moves them toward more abstract ideas" (Carlisle, 2011, p.20). Faust et al. (2014) contend that "middle school students are intensely curious, argumentative, inexperienced with independence, and fledgling critical thinkers" (p. 44).

Identity development

Middle school is a time when students really begin their search for self-identity as they seek out who they are in relationship to the world around them (Erikson, 1949; Wentzel, 2015). Erikson (1959) states, "To complete the search for an identity, the adolescent must find an answer to the question 'Who am I?' and must also establish some orientation toward the future and come to terms with the questions, 'Where am 1 going?' and 'Who am 1 to become?'" (p.54). Wentzel (2015) states that "Identity is typically defined with respect to beliefs about 'Who I am' and 'Who I want to be'" (p.306). Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012) further state, "A clear and well-developed identity and favorable self-esteem promise positive development throughout adolescence and even across a whole life span" (p.6).

Teachers and peers play an important role in the development of student self-identity because "Identity is based on psychosocial reciprocity" (Erikson, 1959, p. 52). Wentzel (2015) notes, "At school, these identities develop as children progress through their school-age years, and they are informed by school-based norms, standards of competence, and their own personal values and goals that have evolved as a function of their social and academic experiences at school (p.300). Erikson (1959) adds, "the importance of the peer group in helping the individual to answer the identity question, "Who am I?" cannot be emphasized enough. The answer to this question depends on social feedback from others who provide the adolescent with their perception and their evaluation of him or her." (p.52).

There appears to be a negative consequence when schools neglect to promote or encourage identity development in their classrooms. Erikson (1959) states, "The adolescent who fails in the search for an identity will experience self-doubt, role diffusion, and role confusion" (p.54). Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012) state the following about the relationship between adolescent development and the development of self-identity.

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by rapid and extensive physical and psychosocial changes which often present developmental crises that challenge the adolescent's coping ability. Successful coping culminates in the formation of a clear and positive identity that can facilitate future development and productive use of personal resources. Problematic coping might make the person vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems. How adolescents address what they experience in adolescence to formulate their identity has a pivotal impact on their subsequent life journeys. (p.1).

If these statements are valid, it makes sense that middle school students require the assistance, guidance, and support of a trusted teacher more than ever. In order to learn who they are and how they fit within society. Educators need to try to find effective ways promote self-identity for all their students. Teachers need to establish classroom structures and routines that assist students during this brief but often times confusing time of life. Perhaps middle school classroom teachers need to be asked to share key insights based on their professional experiences in order to better understand how to create a classroom climate that can best foster the development of self-identity for all their students. This article is based on a 2022 study that examines how Canadian middle school teachers attempt to do this.

Methodology

The original purpose of the 2022 study was to capture the perceptions of middle school classroom teachers and learn more about how they positively connected with middle school students. In order to gain insight into how middle school teachers positively connected with their students, I first obtained approval from my University's ethics board and consent from a Canadian school division to conduct my study. I then contacted several middle schools in the school division and asked for consent to invite teachers to participate in my study. If consent was received by the principals, I invited teachers from their school to participate in my study through a brief **presentation** and/or by letters I provided. Teachers were informed in the letter that participation was optional and would be kept confidential. Any teachers who were interested in participating in my study were asked to contact me by email. Prior to study participation, teachers were required to provide written consent.

Four middle school teachers consented to participate in this study. They provided me with written consent, and I sent them potential dates to meet individually or together as a whole group. Due to COVID restrictions, interviews were done individually via zoom videoconference. Prior to meeting, each participant was asked to complete a brief information sheet on years taught, post-secondary education completed, and awards and other recognition they have received related to teaching. Each participant participated individually in one zoom videoconference.

Participants were free to withdraw from the semi-structured interviews at any time. Only I was aware of the identity of each participant. Each interview was audio taped. Additionally, I took detailed notes throughout each interview. Transcripts of the four interviews were generated using Otter.ai, which is a speech-to-text software. Each participant was provided with their transcript for review. Every participant was generally satisfied with their transcript, although one noted several spelling errors in one transcript. These errors were corrected. At this point I brought in a research assistant, and asked that we each independently review the transcripts and seek out potential themes. After some discussion, we agreed upon several themes (or highlights). I sent a list of these themes to each participant. One participant asked to reconsider the wording on one of the themes, and I agreed to amend it as recommended. After one final review of the transcripts, several themes/highlights emerged from across all of the transcripts. After completing a final report of the study, I sent each participant an electronic version of it. Finally, I sent the final report to the school division that provided consent for the study.

Findings

Two of the significant themes/highlights that emerged from the study will be highlighted for the purposes of this article as they (a) relate to the potentially turbulent times that many students experience during middle school; and (b) underline the importance of connecting with teachers who inevitably serve as their guides. The themes are as follows:
1. Middle school students often live "between two worlds".
2. Middle school students are in the "age of discovery".

These two themes will be further explored in the upcoming section. Many direct quotes from the participants in the study are shared in the following section. Please note, for the benefit of the reader I have removed some words that participants repeated, expressions such as "um", "and", or "like", and edited for minor grammatical reasons.

Between Two Worlds

Participants in the study shared that effective middle school teachers recognize that middle school students are constantly fluctuating between the world of the child and the world of the teenager. The time they spend between these two worlds is short but critical. Middle school teachers believed they needed to embrace this reality. They believed that the teacher's role was to be the "constant".

Being the constant

Each participant shared their thoughts on how the middle years represented such a unique stage of life, as the students they taught could not be classified solely as children, nor could they be characterized as young adults. Rather, they seemed to fluidly travel in between these two categories. Participants noted how challenging, temporary, and critical this stage was for human beings. One participant stated, "[M]iddle years kids have a foot in childhood, and a foot in adolescence. They want you to understand where their feet are at any given moment of any given day in any given situation - and reach them where they are." One participant exclaimed, "[Y]our 11-year-old, your 12-year-old is mature one minute and crying the next minute and you don't know what the heck happened in this in between there. But you have 20 of them doing the same thing." This inconsistency in presenting behaviours of middle school students was touched upon in several interviews.

One participant described the inconsistent behaviours of middle school students as "a moving target" for parents and teachers alike. One participant shared, "But middle years… it's the complete paradox…On one hand, it's exactly what you can imagine it to be. Annoying, obnoxious…or just like absolutely ridiculous…And then on the flip side, they break every stereotype you've ever imagined." One participant shared that at times the typical middle school student "isn't really happy to be there", and at other times may be "eager to please." One participant offered that on any given school day student in their class "might have a really phenomenal class but they can still become more 'cool for school', so to speak, [and] are more cautious about how they open up."

Participants offered that much of what they received from students depended on grade level. In the earlier middle school grades, one participant stated that when students enter middle school, "There's less of a teenager in them", then added, "but when you get to grade eight, you're navigating a bit more…There's maybe low, sometimes a little less motivation." One participant shared that there, "seems to be more drama and more things going on in their lives as they get older. I think they become more socially aware. Whereas [in] grade six, they still just want to go and play recess and they just kind of are happy and want to just talk about things [like]… 'Did you watch this', or talk about a movie."

Participants emphasized that even though students may travel 'between worlds', it was the teacher's responsibility to be the constant in their lives. Participants seemed to discuss strategies and practices that they incorporated in their classrooms that promoted identity development for their students. Before teachers were able to develop the critical thinking skills of their students, it was essential that clear boundaries and routines were first established and maintained.

Boundaries

Participants shared that being a consistent and responsible adult in their students' lives meant establishing boundaries for students. One participant offered that one "piece that's very important to middle years' kids is boundaries. They want to push you there. They're at this stage of life where they're like, 'I'm almost grown up, and I don't have to do what you tell me to do'. And so you have to [as] teachers very clearly delineate where the boundaries are. And be consistent with those boundaries. Even if even if you think they're harsh. But if you don't, then they will walk all over you." The participant then stated, "[B]oundaries can be negotiated, okay? But if it's not okay for them to do XY behavior, then it's never okay for them to do XY behavior. And they know that."

When discussing why boundaries were so important, one participant offered that they were to keep all students feeling safe. The participant noted, "I always felt that my job as their teacher was to create a safe space in the four walls where they could just relax, right and be okay. Because nothing bad is going to happen to them in the four walls of the classroom". While keeping students safe was highlighted by the participants, it should be noted that not one of the participants explicitly stated in the interviews what they were keeping students safe from.

Self-regulation

While clearly articulating and insisting upon boundaries was important for middle school teachers, several participants also spoke of the importance of teaching students the skills of self-regulation. One participant noted, "[I]f you teach kids to regulate, and you help them regulate, they do." One participant shared the following thoughts on intentionally teaching students to self-regulate through practices like daily meditation exercises.

This concept of self-regulation, and learning how you learn as a person and as a human being. And learning how to manage…That's also a self-regulation piece. There [are] all those layers. When you do it in your classroom…you're talking about meditative practice."

Several participants were keen to discuss some details of mindfulness and meditative strategies that they incorporated into their classroom routines. Please note, several specific 'meditation' and 'mindfulness' practices that teachers incorporate into their classrooms will be further discussed later in this article.

Forecasting

Participants acknowledged that one of their essential roles as middle school teachers was to prepare students for the future during this 'ephemeral' (i.e., short-lived) time in students' lives. One participant referred to this aspect of their jobs as 'forecasting.' The purpose of forecasting is to alleviate anxiety for middle school students by clearly presenting, reminding, and posting upcoming events so that they can be prepared. The participant shared an example of how they forecasted for their students, saying, "Giving [students] a forecast helps, especially [for] kids that struggle with anxiousness or worrier or alternative thinking." In order to provide forecasts for students, the participant ensured that whiteboards had updated daily, weekly, monthly and annual calendars on them, and reviewed these with students aloud. This was especially helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic months. The participant added the following.

[I] give them a month ahead so that they have an idea of what's coming. I think the uncertainty of the pandemic has shown that what the kids need to know is what's next, what is coming up next. It helps them feel a lot more comfortable. And that forecast is more of making sure everyone is calm and collected. So they're not freaking out. If they come in and they're uncertain of the day, kids need a lot of certainty and [in] middle years and [they need] a sense of routine.

Consistent communication

As middle school students may float between the childhood and young adult world, participants stated that consistent communication was critical. Students needed to be made aware of boundaries, expectations, and the future. In summary, participants stated that students needed to be prepared for what's to come in the "real world". In this way participants seemed to be facilitating students' early work on developing self-identity.

One participant encapsulated the sentiments of several other participants by saying, "It's all part of the real-world experience. Are we communicating clearly? Are we contributing equally? Because in [the] real world adults have to do that. Teenagers have to do that. That's what I established really early."

The age of discovery

Teachers in this study assisted in facilitating individual identity by acknowledging that middle school students want to learn about and connect with themselves (introspection) and the outside world (extrospection). They contended that effective middle school teachers needed to act as their students' guides. Participants also believed that one of their roles was to create opportunities to discuss and learn about local and global issues.

Participants in this study believed that middle school students were at a critical stage in life where they wanted to learn more about themselves and the world they live in. One participant shared

that the middle school years as, "an awakening. They're entering a new stage of life." One participant shared the importance of students having "tools to navigate their world". One participant added, "And so social justice becomes important." One participant noted that one of their main roles as middle school teachers was "fostering independence", and this could only be accomplished by learning about themselves and the world they live in. It appears that the participants understand that middle school is a time for students to learn about themselves (introspection) and the world around them (extrospection).

Instrospection (connecting with self)

In terms of introspective practices, students needed opportunities to develop intrapersonal skills. Oftentimes this was done informally through brief student "check-ins". One participant shared that, "the socio-emotional teaching is how I go about everything. I do a lot around just [having] daily conversations with kids." On a few occasions, participants thought that providing students with alternative spaces when they became overwhelmed was an effective strategy. One participant commented, "[P]roviding an alternative space, I think for kids that [are] either overstimulated or overwhelmed has really helped maintain that comfort."

This seemed to be a strategy that was used only when deemed necessary. One participant shared that at times individual students became so upset in the classroom and the option of providing an alternative space for that student wasn't possible. In these instances, the participant shared, "I've had scenarios where I've had to take my whole class out, but almost in a way that doesn't make the situation more toxic, but provides a safe place for the moment that is possibly happening." The participant thought that these incidents, although unfortunate, also provided a valuable lesson in terms of empathy to the class.

I've worked with a range of abilities and disabilities…I think what [scenarios like removing the class when an individual student becomes tremendously distraught]…gives them a sense of empathy, which is also another big focus for me. That kids understand emotional responses from other kids. That can be difficult in the middle years' brain when it's all developing and transitioning. I think the empathy piece has to be taught deliberately. And it's done through things like normalizing a meltdown or normalizing a moment where we have to…leave the room.

Teaching and incorporating mindfulness practices can be helpful. For the most part, participants liked to discuss preventative strategies rather than reactive ones. They preferred universal, whole-class approaches to address issues of worry or anxiety prior to any incidents. One participant thought that, "mindfulness practices have to be given regularly to kids. I do a lot of meditation in the class, which also resets the tone. I do it in the morning, first thing, and then I'll do it in the afternoon, right after lunch. And a 10-minute meditation of just practicing deep breathing is really impactful for getting to the learning." The participant added, "Typically the meditation becomes a really good anchor." Furthermore, the participant shared the many benefits of incorporating meditation practices in the middle school classroom, especially with one student with special needs.

[K]ids are reset after a wild lunch or kids or reset after maybe a rough night at home when they're coming to school. The meditation has big power to get everybody on board. I have a student this year who…has a brain injury. [F]rom the very beginning, he recognized that there was a quiet that happened during meditation. In the last couple of weeks, we've seen a real focus on him to be focused and not noisy. He…doesn't make a noise during the 10 minutes we have for meditation. It's almost like he's recognized that that's part of our community. That was a big progression for us to see happen.

Participants stressed the importance of providing opportunities for middle school students to develop interpersonal skills. One participant shared that their goal was, "everyone at the end of the day respects each other for who they are…They don't necessarily have to be best friends." Further, the participant shared the following comparison of a classroom being like a family you live with for a short-term.

One of the things that I stress with the kids is that I never expect them to be best friends   as they grew up in adults. But like a family, especially in a multi age setting, you're with   this group of learners for a couple of years. And when you're with them for a few years, having that learning relationship like a family where it's like having a sibling. If you get along with your brother or your sister or your cousin or your auntie some days are good, some days are not so good. You keep your distance on those bad days. But I think treating it like a community of learners is part of that building the sense of competence.

One participant summarized their classroom as a "patchwork" of different people, cultures, and lived experiences. The participant noted, "Every kid brings in a different strength, and recognizing those strengths instead of looking at the deficit model." Further, the participant believed that "the diversity of my community has to be celebrated", and also needed to work together. The participant shared, "I always describe it like a patchwork quilt…that we all bring in something very diverse…Culturally diverse, emotionally, socially, cognitively diverse. And recognizing how each of the learners if they're verbal, nonverbal, behaviorally challenged, can bring something that they could be celebrated."

Finally, one participant shared the potential that multi-age classrooms in middle school hold as a means of learning and fostering empathy. They stated the following.

> [The] multi-age classroom [is] a classroom where that social emotional connection is established. Everybody worries about body type and image. And we talk about that all the time. Not everybody's skinny, not everybody's tall. Not everybody's short, not everybody's round. But I think when you recognize those pieces of the patches, that come together to build our classroom. It does show that empathy is established, and that empathy is part of the vehicle to get kids to learn. And then what I've also noticed multi-age. It's not always the older kids helping the younger kids. I've had scenarios where younger kids are helping older kids and I do intentional mixed groupings. Where when I'm grouping kids together, I try not to put them they're best friends, I try not to put them in the same grade. I want them to mix it up a little bit.

Extrospection (connecting with the outside world)

Participants spoke of the importance of connecting middle school students with the "world" outside of their classroom and school. One participant offered, "Pre-COVID, we used to do field trips on a monthly basis, where we would go to [name withheld] library, and…they'd be there every month. The day before we would make a plan of what they were going to do over the course of the day, based on what we were learning and their priorities." The field trip to the library would ultimately involve students spending lunch in a nearby food court, and then returning to the school to, "report back on what they did and how they understood it." The participant thought that it was very helpful that the library staff was so welcoming, saying that their greetings were typically, "'Oh, we're so happy to see you!' They would brag about our classes being there." When asked if behavioural or safety issues ever arose from these library trips, the participant explained in detail the variety of supervision strategies teachers used throughout the day to keep the students safe, but concluded by saying that the library, "Seems like a safe place to be goofy."

One participant highlighted a math lesson once conducted at a shopping mall that students really enjoyed. They explained what the mall math lesson looked like.

> We would go to [name of mall], they'd [i.e., students] have a spreadsheet, they'd have teams, pre-designed teams, [and] they'd 'have $3,000 to spend…[T]here were rules of what they could how much they could spend on certain items, they had to have a certain amount of items, certain amounts had to be on sale. They had to do the sales tax.

When asked how they ensured student safety, the participant added, "We had certain checkpoints. And looking at a checkpoint in the morning, where we all met and everyone checked in, then they went out again." The participant also shared that they, "had a teaching partner who coined the idea that we should have half the building space, and twice the school buses. Every school should

have their own school bus, or two, depending on the size that they can use on an ongoing basis, or classes." The participant expressed that many students seemed to be very engaged in these types of activities.

The importance of discussing current issues and events. Participants expressed how middle school students wanted to learn more about and engage in current events. They thought that facilitating discussions about local, national, and international events was a necessary and valuable role for them. On occasions the topics discussed could be controversial and sensitive, but that school was the very place these conversations needed to happen. Again, this practice connects well with identity development of students. One participant noted the questions that middle school students recently had regarding issues that arose across the country due to COVID-19.

They want to talk about current events, like they can't help but they want to talk about what's in the news. They want to talk about why everybody's fighting, and they want to talk in the school about it. They don't want to necessarily just go home and talk about it, or read about it on their phones…Because [a middle school student] wants to be treated like a grown-up.

As issues arise, it is helpful to have established connections with parents. One participant acknowledged that they occasionally "do get pushback from parents about [discussing current events and issues]. And I say, 'Well, they're asking, so I need to talk to them about it, because they want to know about it, and where it's a safe space at school." The participant expressed that, "I don't give my personal opinion, or I try hard not to. I just pull up an article on the screen. We read the article and we talk about the big words they don't understand and the concepts behind it."

This is where participants found great value in establishing connecting with parents. One participant stated, "It is really good to be able to have a relationship with parents". When asked why, one participant said that it assisted with "dialogue", and another stated, "just to make sure that the parents know what's going on in school, and what we're seeing, so that they can kind of be mindful, have a conversation with a child." Another participant shared that teacher-parent connections were critical "as issues come up."

Discussion and analysis

The intention of this study was to gain insight into how teachers connect with their middle school students. It appears that one of the ways they made positive connections was to facilitate middle school students' identity development efforts. This aligns with Carlyle's (2022) assertion that students in middle school are "developing metacognition" (p.20) and Faust et al.'s (2014) claim that "middle school students are intensely curious, argumentative, inexperienced with independence, and fledgling critical thinkers" (p. 44). As stated earlier, middle school is a time when students really begin their search for self-identity as they begin to answer the question, "Who am I" (Erikson, 1949) and "Who I want to be" Wentzel, 2015). Erikson (1959) states, "To complete the search for an identity, the adolescent must find an answer to the question "Who am I?" and "Who [do] I want to be[?]" (Wentzel, 2015, p.306). It appears that middle school is a critical time to begin to begin developing a sense of identity, as that it is a critical component of pychosocial development (Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012). Teachers have an incredible opportunity to facilitate the development of middle school student identity development (Wentzel, 2015), and need to take advantage of this short "window in time" because "Identity is based on psychosocial reciprocity" (Erikson, 1959, p. 52).

Teaching about themselves, the world, and difficult topics that arise

Based on the responses from participants in this study, middle school teachers incorporate a number of effective stragies and practices in order to facilitate meta-cognition and identity development. Most significantly, participants in this study addressed this by providing opportunities for students to connect with and learn more about themselves (introspection), each other, and the world they live in (extrospection). Teachers thought that one of their roles was to help students develop intrapersonal and interpersonal skills such as empathy. Participants also shared the value of exposing

students to meaningful learning opportunities outside of the school. Sometimes this meant discussing difficult topics in the classroom. They shared a number of creative ways in which they did this, and provided several powerful examples of why this neede to happen in a middle school classroom. In this regard it was imperative that teachers created (or provided) a safe space for students to learn about sensitive but important issues. Teacher-parent connections were also vital in this regard.

While connecting with family was seen as beneficial in elementary years (Reimer, 2019), teachers suggested that specifically establishing positive connections with their middle school students' parents assisted when difficult issues would occasionally arise. Participants emphasized the necessity of discussing current events and issues with their students. Still, discussing these issues can be "tricky" and "sensitive'. This task can certainly be made less difficult if teachers have established positive relationships with their students' parents and caregivers prior to having these critical conversations in the classroom.

One way this was done by participants was the local/global discussions encouraging critical thinking about sensitive and controversial events/topics.The participants in this study spent time discussing the importance of establishing routines in their middle school classrooms. They acknowledged that middle school was a time of great uncertainty, turbulence, and discovery for most students. Therefore , they incorporated a number of strategies and practices in their classrooms. For example, participants expressed the need for teachers to be the consistent adult in their students' lives by communicating and insisting that students adhere to certain boundaries in order to reduce certain behaviours and help make all students feel safe (again, safe from what exactly was not made clear and should be explored further). In order to set the stage for identity development, self-regulation strategies were promoted and taught in class. To students feeling anxious about the future, a strategy referred to as 'forecasting' was practiced by one participant. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of clear and consistent communication.

The establishment of clear routines is considered to be a significant element of student success (Fink & Siedentop, 1989, Reimer, 2022). The middle school teachers in this study tended to focus more on routines that supported socio-emotional and mental health, rather than routines that promoted academic success. Although academic routines were considered important, it was critical that in middle school, students received emotional support from their teachers.

Limitations

There were several significant limitations to this study. First, COVID-19 regulations prevented the participants from gathering together in-person. Instead, the choice of participants was to meet individually with me. I would have been interesting to have seen what ideas might have been generating by gathering together and listening to one another. Second, this study was small. Only four participants volunteered for this study. It would have been helpful to have had more participants participate in the study, but due to COVID-19, I found it difficult to recruit any more. Still, I am very grateful to the four middle school teachers who participated in this study. Third, participants spent significant time speaking about the importance of making students feel safe in class. Although one can speculate that teachers were referring to keeping students safe from harmful behaviours or bullying, they never explicitly stated what they needed to keep students safe from.

Recommendations

This study generated a number of recommendations for future studies and research in the areas of developing positive teacher-student connections and facilitating student identity. Based on this study's findings, further studies identifying which classroom routines successfully facilitate identity development for students and which routines are not effective. It would be interesting to conduct further studies comparing and contrasting which practices might be more or less effective at the elementary, middle, and senior high school level. Additionally, strategies incorporated to seek out the best ways in which teachers can effectively explore and examine potentially issues in the classroom are recommended.

Conclusion

As stated earlier in this article, middle school is an 'ephemeral' (i.e., short-lived) time in students' lives. It is also a critical time for young people. One of the reasons for this is because middle school is a time in life when students really start to ask themselves the existential question, "Who am I?". Middle school teachers have the imperative role of facilitating the development of student identity development, at least at its early stages. Participants in this study appear facilitate identity development by encouraging introspection and extrospection in their classrooms. They recognize the importance of establishing class routines promoting self-regulation and developing empathy for others. They create opportunities for students to discuss and learn about local and global topics in class. As a result of their efforts, middle school teachers appear to play a key role in assisting students discover who they are.

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